

Misunderstandings about IEPs, 504s, and college accommodations for LD, ADHD: Clarifying vocabulary

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Whether I am online looking at posts people are sharing or talking to parents or professionals at my presentations, I find that there is — understandably — a lot of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of what does and doesn't happen for students with disabilities at college.

Based on the conversations I've had at my presentations, it seems some people either believe:

- there are no disability accommodations available at college (or that they're only for people with visual, hearing, or physical disabilities)

or

- that colleges have to follow students' high school plans.

Neither of these statements is true, but I understand why people believe them.

One central fact is important to understand - IEPs or 504 plans are not valid once students either graduate from high school or age out of the system, and those plans don't "transfer" to college. I've spoken to people who have said that their district moves all students from an IEP to a 504 plan in their senior year of high school, based on the idea that 504s are valid because Section 504 covers colleges.

It's understandable that people believe this (they don't realize that while colleges are covered by 504, they come under a different subpart than K-12 schools do), but this assumption about those plans is incorrect, too. On my site, I have a post that explains this.

This is where I think vocabulary becomes important, as it can lead to unintentional misunderstandings.

"Letter of Accommodation" vs. "Plans"

In my presentations, I state that there are no "plans" at college, meaning that students' IEPs and 504 plans aren't valid there, and colleges aren't required to create a similar document — they

simply have to provide accommodations. Sometimes, an audience member will say that their child attends X college and has a 504 plan.

Obviously, I can't be sure how offices at every college in the country operate, but I suspect that there is a misunderstanding about what these documents are and what they do.

Typically, when they approve students for accommodations, disability services offices (or the assigned contact person, if there isn't a designated office) will write what is commonly called a Letter (or email) of Accommodation (called a "LOA" or "EOA") that students often deliver to their professors (though processes can vary from college to college). I think that some offices call these documents a "504 plan" even though they don't actually lay out a "plan."

To me, the word "plan" implies that someone will help students set goals, identify steps to achieve those goals, and assess whether or not students have met them. I suspect that most of these college "504 plans" look much more like LOAs and don't function as true "plans."

A possible unintended interpretation people might make from some colleges' use of the term "504 plan" for what is really an

accommodation letter is that students' 504 plans "transfer" to college.

Again, 504 plans are no longer valid or active once students graduate from high school. They can help serve as documentation of a disability (depending upon colleges' requirements), and students *may* receive the same accommodations that they had in high school, but this is not because the college is "following" the 504 plan. Instead, it is because these students were found eligible for accommodations, and specifically for the accommodations they requested.

"Eligible" vs. "Entitled"

This brings up another point — students at college are not "entitled" to receive accommodations simply because they had an IEP or 504 plan previously. They have to be found "eligible" for accommodations at their college, and even if that happens, this doesn't mean that they are "entitled" to the same accommodations they received in high school.

Disability services offices get to decide who is eligible and what accommodations are appropriate. Don't worry — most students will be found eligible with no problem, and if they are using basic

accommodations in high school, they'll likely receive the same ones in college.

Eligibility is also an important idea, and vocabulary can matter here, too. While most students who have received accommodations in high school will also be found eligible for them in college, this not guaranteed.

For example, students whose reports say that they have a "learning difference" (rather than a disability) and whose testing does not reflect a substantial limitation to learning, or who have only test anxiety (and not a diagnosed disability) may not be found eligible for accommodation when they attend college.

"Coordinator" vs. "Case Manager"

At many colleges, the person who serves as students' contact and helps to arrange their accommodations is called a "coordinator," rather than a "case manager." The former term conveys the idea that these individuals only "coordinate" accommodations, and not that they will do things that students' case managers did in high school, such as checking in with faculty about students' progress or meeting regularly with students. Most coordinators don't perform these functions.

Not Really Disability “Services,” and Not Really a “Program”

What may lead to misunderstandings, too, is the name of colleges’ disability “services” office. These offices provide accommodations for students with learning disabilities and ADHD, but most don’t provide what might be considered the kinds of “services” that people might expect based on what high schools provide (such as tutoring by a learning disabilities specialist) because the laws in place don’t require this.

Another source of confusion may be that some offices may have titles like the “Disabled Students’ Program.” I think the word “program” can be confusing, as it implies that students will have access to “case managers” who will create a “plan,” which could include access to special “services,” rather than that students will have a “coordinator” who arranges their “accommodations.” Most offices offer accommodations but don’t provide an organized program.

Some colleges *do* offer separate programs for students with LD and/or ADHD; these are truly programs, and they typically charge an additional fee.

It is important for everyone involved in students’ college transition to have an accurate sense of the environment, so that

students' preparation for college can be based on correct information. I hope that these explanations will help to clarify what students with learning disabilities and ADHD should expect at college.

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